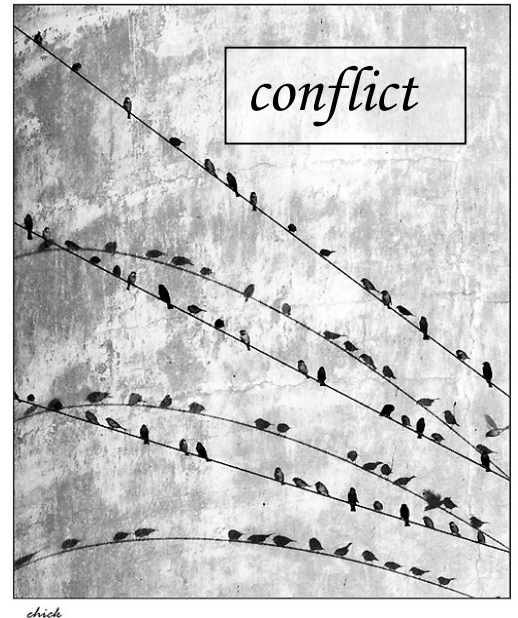


dealing with conflict

Conflict arises. It can hurt us, can damage our ties with friends, family, and comrades, it can harm our health, and can hinder or even destroy our movements and communities.

But we believe that **conflict can also be** the source of **strength, strategy, truth, collective power, and freedom.**

We are committed to resolving conflicts peacefully, respectfully, effectively, and justly, and we aim not to resort to the civil or criminal legal systems. While there are many conflict resolution and transformation processes that we admire and have used, we are most interested in Circle processes, largely because *anyone can do them starting right now.* That includes you.



what is a circle process?

A Circle is a process in which everyone immediately impacted by a situation comes together to seek a resolution. In a community, that may be the facilitator with the two parties in conflict, all those immediately impacted by the harm, other affected outside parties, or some combination. It is important that the person responsible for the harm is present at the circle, and when possible, that the harmed party is as well. Similarly, in the case of a conflict between two people, it is most important that those two people are there, and also important that any other people with a stake in the resolution take part in the Circle. Circle processes shift the emphasis in the aftermath of harm:

from **coercion** or punishment to **healing**
from **solely individual** to **individual and collective** accountability
from **dependence on the state** to **self-sufficiency** in a community
from justice as “**getting even**” to justice as “**getting well**”

from an emphasis on **banishment** to an emphasis on **reintegration**, that is, from **kicking out** to **drawing in**

what does the facilitator do?

A Circle is led by a **facilitator** or Circle Keeper, usually a community member, whose job it is to:

- (1) **Prepare for the Circle.** The facilitator helps set up the space, make sure everyone knows the time and place, check in with folks beforehand, outline the concept and expectations of the Circle to anyone new to it.
- (2) **Set the tone.** The facilitator should be as warm and calm as possible, and should not contribute to hostilities or unfair remarks.
- (3) **Facilitate the dialogue.** The facilitator will choose what questions to ask, suggest a structure for the conversation, and help ensure that participants are sticking to any agreements made with the group. The facilitator does not decide the outcome, judge the validity of any opinions or views, have a more important role than anyone else in the room.
- (4) **Maintain focus and regulate the pace.** The facilitator helps to be sure the group stays on track and that we move quickly or slowly enough to address the issue effectively.
- (5) **Make sure everyone gets heard.** The facilitator should make sure the talking stick is used and respected (more on that below), that everyone is getting an equal voice in the conversation, and that participants are listening to each other.
- (6) **Suggest time-outs or silence.** The facilitator can suggest pauses, stretches, periods of silence, or other methods to focus the group’s attention or diffuse tension.

some common guidelines for circles

- **Use the Talking Stick.** This is an object, usually something of meaning to the group, that we use to help the dialogue. When you have it, you can talk. When you don't, you can't. That's it. One great use of the talking stick is to facilitate silence. You can pause before you talk, think in silence after you've spoken before passing it on, or just hold on to it for a moment to give the group space for silent reflection. We like to call it the Silence Stick.
- **Speak from the heart, and use 'I' statements.** That means we will speak honestly, and about our own experience, and not assume we can speak for the experience, intentions, motivations, thoughts, or feelings of other people.
- **Speak with respect.** No cheating.
- **Listen with respect.** We commit to trying to hear each other, even when what we hear is surprising, upsetting, hurtful, or just not what we expected.
- **Remain in the circle.** We will stay in the circle and not leave it, even when we are upset or frustrated. Exceptions to this are potty breaks, time-outs, and fires.
- **Honor confidentiality.** What's said in the Circle stays there. No transcripts, reports, or gossip.
- **Review these guidelines and add any others each time.** Each Circle and each participant is different, so every time we convene one, we'll revisit these guidelines and change them for the group that day.
- **Stick to agreements.** If we agree to behave a certain way or do a certain thing, we'll do it.

what happens in a circle?

- (1) Start with an opening question (for example, how are you feeling about this?).
- (2) Move to a question about the issue at hand (what is your concern about/experience with the issue we're here to discuss?).
- (3) Allow people to continue discussing until the facilitator senses most issues have been raised.
- (4) Invite people to express their needs (what do you need from today?).
- (5) Invite people to propose solutions (what could make this right?).
- (6) Invite people to raise concerns about those solutions.
- (7) Invite people to offer support or make their own commitments (OK, person X said she would do thing Y, what will each of us do to help make this better/support person X?).
- (8) Invite people to reflect about how they are feeling at the end.
- (9) Encourage people to sit in silence for a moment, break bread together, and relax.

For each question, the talking stick moves around the circle and everyone speaks in order. It should go clockwise or counter-clockwise for the whole session, and while anyone can pass the stick, it should never just move back and forth between two parties without giving the people in between a chance to talk. The circle shape does a lot of the work in this process—it helps broaden the view of an issue, diffuse tension, diminish the back-and-forth or retaliatory vibe in conflict, reduce blaming and shaming, and encourage reflection and responsibility—so it's important to stick with it, even when it seems inefficient. The facilitator can shift questions, check in with everyone about timing and preferences for how the conversation can go, invite popcorns or brainstorming or ways of speaking other than in the circle, but the default is the stick going around and around and everyone speaking one at a time until things are better.

Circles are not a bad thing, and neither is conflict. These aren't like courts, and they're not a sign of failure. They are like good, preventive medicine. Circles may result in better understanding, agreements to change future behavior, commitments to actions to repair any harm done, or, in the worst cases, decisions to part ways. People may choose to convene follow-up circles with the same or different parties, pause the circle to invite others to join, suggest to others that they take part in a circle of their own, or use these methods just to facilitate hard conversations about ourselves, our race, class, gender, or other aspects of our identity, our community, movement, and our world. We recommend reading *Peacemaking Circles* by Kay Pranis if you want to know more. But mostly, we recommend drawing from your and your community's insight, strength, smarts, and experience.